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TAGS: PGOV ES
SUBJECT: SALARY INCREASE FOR SALVADORAN LEGISLATORS CREATES
UPROAR

¶1. (U) Summary: On January 18 members of the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly cashed their first paychecks of 2008 and were apparently shocked to discover that they had given themselves a raise of over 40 percent from the previous year. The ensuing controversy has resulted in denials, accusations, and calls for investigation. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On September 27, 2007 the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly approved a 2008 budget which included a significant salary increase, an average of 44 percent, for members of the legislative body. The increase will add approximately six million dollars to the legislative budget. Legislators will now earn USD 5,885 monthly, with members of the executive committee earning USD 7,725. (Note: The current monthly minimum wage is USD 182 and was increased by seven percent in ¶2007. End note.)

¶3. (U) At the time of the vote, former-PDC and now-independent legislator, Juan Pablo Duran complained that he had not seen the budget and could not vote on something he had not seen. According to media reports, the President of the Assembly, Ruben Orellana, assured the legislator that the budget had been reviewed by all the factions. The budget subsequently passed with 70 votes out of 84.

¶4. (U) In the days since the controversy erupted, members of the FMLN have denied any knowledge of the increase; however, at least some of the checks had been signed by FMLN legislator Zoila Quijada in her role as the secretary of the executive board. Several members of ARENA, most notably Guillermo Gallegos, the chief of the ARENA faction in the legislature, have voiced their opposition to the increase. However, on January 25 ARENA Deputy Beto Rivas told us that it was unlikely that the increase would be reversed.

¶5. (U) On January 24, during his visit to Honduras, President Saca claimed that neither he nor COENA had knowledge of the increase. He said that he disapproved of the raise, but added that the Legislative Assembly is an independent body. Civil society organizations have also expressed their opposition to the increase.

¶6. (U) Comment: Public confidence in the Assembly is already low, and this will only serve to further discredit the institution. While the controversy has put ARENA on the defensive, media reports have cast doubt on the FMLN's claims of ignorance. Thus far there have been several initiatives to revoke the increase; however, all have failed to receive enough votes. At this point, it seems unlikely that there is sufficient political will to rescind the increases.

¶7. (U) Comment continued: Some legislators have acknowledged that they have been discredited in the eyes of the public, but seem to feel that rescinding the salary increase will do little to change public perception. In a country where the

general public is hard hit by violent crime and the police force consistently cries poverty and pleads for greater funding, the Legislative Assembly voting itself a significant pay raise unavoidably comes across as both breathtakingly shameless and politically tone-deaf. End Comment.
Glazer